

OBJECTIVE 2.2-INCREASE TRANSPARENCY AND PUBLIC PARTICIPATION:

Listen to and collaborate with impacted stakeholders and provide effective platforms for public participation and meaningful engagement.

Freedom of Information Act Requests

In preparation for a national Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) Lean project that will begin in January 2018, Region 6 formed a regional team to capture and improve our current processes in (1) assigning and tracking FOIAs, and (2) searching, reviewing and then uploading responsive records.

On November 21, 2107, EPA announced that the Agency is on track to significantly reduce the backlog of FOIA requests received prior to 2017. EPA's National FOIA Office and offices across the agency have been working hard to clear the backlog of FOIA requests that existed at the start of 2017. As of early October, 2017, EPA had 652 open FOIA requests that were submitted in prior years. As of November 21, the Agency is on track to provide responses to over 70 percent of those requests by the end of the calendar year. In addition to clearing the backlog from previous years, EPA continues to process incoming FOIA requests, to ensure the current administration is being open and transparent and to avoid unnecessary costs to the American taxpayer. For requests that cannot be completed by the end of the calendar year, the Agency is developing request-specific plans to ensure they are completed as early as possible. EPA is currently defending 41 FOIA lawsuits, which demonstrates that the public feels stronger about access to information. The National FOIA Office set targets, shared best practices, and worked together with the regions and programs to ensure that relevant information is shared with the public in ways that properly responded to each request. The National FOIA Office will also be developing a new webpage showing the progress of the backlog reduction effort, which will be found www.epa.gov/foia.

In fiscal year 2017 EPA received 11,493 FOIA requests, 995 more than the previous fiscal year. In that same period, EPA received 36 new FOIA lawsuits, compared to only 12 lawsuits in the previous year. The EPA is under a production deadline in litigation brought by the Natural Resources Defense Council (NRDC). There is one of several FOIA requests seeking communications between EPA staff and the Trump Presidential Transition Team.

The numbers provided for pre-2017 FOIA requests do not include 34 pre-2017 requests received by EPA's Office of the Inspector General, which is an independent office within EPA.

Environmental Justice Forum

In June 2018, Region 6 is planning to host a region-wide environmental justice forum as a culmination of the environmental justice workshops held in each of the five states (Arkansas, Louisiana, New Mexico, Oklahoma, and Texas) since 2013.

Each of the state workshops brought together grassroots organizations and partners, academia, local officials and government representatives to better understand concerns and challenges facing environmental justice communities. Participants discuss strategies and best practices for healthy communities and a collaborative action plan that addresses regional and state-wide environmental justice priorities. Each of our state environmental agencies have an environmental justice program.

On February 6, 2017 Environmental Conference of States issued a report, titled “State Approaches to Community Engagement and Equity Considerations in Permitting,” highlights efforts by Tennessee, California, New York, South Carolina, Mississippi and Minnesota to integrate EJ into their environmental permits, though it cautions that regulators' discretion in that area can be limited both by the terms of the Civil Rights Act's Title VI and state laws. The EPA released the Environmental Justice 2020 Action Agenda in October 2016. The final document incorporates relevant input from Environmental Conference of States, which represents many state environment agencies.

In October 2017, EPA announced nearly \$1.2 million in competitive grants selected for award to 36 locally-based community and tribal organizations working to address environmental justice issues in their communities. The grants enable organizations to conduct research, provide education, and develop community-driven solutions to local health and environmental issues in minority, low-income, and tribal communities. Region 6 received 4 grants. The ARC Foundation seeks to train up to 200 Oklahoma City residents on affordable water conservation practices for home use, as well as to bring more awareness to the community about the need to protect its natural water resources. Arkansas Interfaith Power & Light proposes to renovate and repurpose an abandoned building and lot to become a local community center where individuals in at-risk areas of Little Rock will be introduced to holistic solutions to local energy production and healthy food alternatives. Sandia Pueblo camps seek to address surface water impairment on the 19 Pueblo reservations by providing water quality monitoring trainings and improving educational outcomes for tribal youth in New Mexico. In New Orleans, T.R.E.E.'s Sunship III program brings 7th grade students from local, low-income schools to the outdoor classroom.

In order to ensure the most underserved and overburdened communities have a meaningful say in environmental protection and regulation, the Office of Environmental Justice moved to the Office of Policy in September 2017. The Office of Environmental Justice works in partnership with the Office of Sustainable Communities, which was renamed the Office of Community Revitalization, to support meaningful engagement and public participation across the agency and lead federal level coordination to consider overburdened community needs and the application of federal resources to meet those needs.

Making a Visible Difference in Communities

EPA Region 6 has selected six communities to better coordinate and leverage resources throughout the agency and with other federal partners. These on-going projects focus on both long standing environmental concerns and their relation to public health as well as emerging issues within communities.

In Crossett, Arkansas, the residents from the predominantly African-American community in West Crossett have been concerned for many years about air emissions and water discharges from the Georgia-Pacific LLC paper facility, particularly the effects of long-term exposure to hazardous chemicals. The Pueblo de Cochiti is interested in integrating green infrastructure into land use planning, stormwater management, infrastructure improvements, transportation planning and open space to enhance community and tribal lands in New Mexico. The town of Anthony, New Mexico lacks land use strategies, has a severe deficit of public recreational facilities, and lacks adequate zoning and subdivision regulations. The nearby communities of Alexandria and Pineville, Louisiana encompass multiple hazardous waste sites, including two active creosoting companies, two remediated EPA Superfund sites and a state-lead inactive waste site. The Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma requested Brownfields assistance

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Federal air regulations require notice and opportunity for public comment as part of the minor New Source Review (NSR) permitting programs. Based on this requirement, the EPA is finalizing a disapproval of the SIP revisions for minor NSR permit public participation requirements in Louisiana and proposing to disapprove “Tier 1” public participation provisions in Oklahoma.

In Louisiana, the deficiency allowed for discretionary public notice for minor NSR actions instead of requiring public notice for minor NSR permitting actions.

In Oklahoma, the deficiencies concern the State’s “Tier” category permitting application process which does not require the opportunity for public comment on permitting actions for minor facilities (sources) and minor modifications to existing major sources. Our discussions are continuing with Oklahoma before we introduce a possible proposed SIP action into concurrence. Regarding the prospective Oklahoma action, the draft proposal to disapprove the public notice portion of the rules is targeted for RA signature on March 15, 2017, but this date is subject to change pending additional discussions with ODEQ about its minor NSR permitting rules.

Improving children's health is fundamental to EPA's mission, and one of the fundamental strategies under the Border 2020 Environmental Program. Children along the border in Texas and New Mexico are impacted by high rates of asthma, obesity exposures to pesticides, chemicals, mercury, lead, vector borne diseases and poor water and air quality, among others. Children are more vulnerable to pollutants than adults due to differences in behavior and biology. U.S. border communities often face a great public health threat because of lack of basic services and adequate infrastructure, illegal dumping, substandard housing, lack of public spaces or parks, and other economic hardships.

The US-Mexico Border Program and EPA's Office of Children's Health funds grants to educate health workers who work directly with U.S. border communities on children's health issues. Trainings reached more than 100 people in three U.S. border communities in 2016, and focused on the Healthy Homes Curriculum and water-borne illnesses. EPA held two Children's Environmental Health Symposiums (El Paso, Texas – September 2015; Brownsville, Texas – August 2016) attended by over 280 participants. The symposiums focused on: 1) education on how early childhood exposure can affect children's health; and 2) networking among the healthcare community and the public in order to better understand children's environmental health risks along the U.S.-Mexico Border.

EPA will continue to address children's health priorities through collaborative partnerships with other federal (i.e. US-MX BHS, DHHS, CDC), state (TxHHS, NMHD) and local agencies, NGO's and academia. EPA funds activities that address children's health through requests for proposals and partnering with the Southwest Center for Pediatric Environmental Health (SWCPEH). Most recently, EPA R6 in coordination with R9 and HQ OCHP launched a children's RFP where two Region 6 applicants along the border were selected for funding in October 2017.

R6 grantees are the NM Department of Health, Texas A&M, and Texas Tech. They are not yet final, but should be in December. The start dates are January 1st. There are two additional grantees from R9 that were awarded under the RFP.

Revitalizing Communities by Growing Local Food Economies

On November 21, 2017, EPA recognized the outstanding accomplishments of 16 winners participating in EPA's Food Recovery Challenge. The data-driven award recipients achieved the highest percent increases in their sector comparing year to year data. Region 6 had 3 winners: Colleges and Universities: University of Houston (Houston, Texas), Sports and Entertainment Venues: Kay Bailey Hutchison Convention Center Dallas (Dallas, Texas), and Restaurants and Food Service Providers: Café de Novo (Dallas, Texas).

The Local Foods, Local Places program was established in December 2014 as a national initiative that helps people create walkable, healthy, economically vibrant neighborhoods through local food enterprise. The program, sponsored by the U.S. Department of Agriculture, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the DOT, the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, the Appalachian Regional Commission, and the Delta Regional Authority, selected 24 communities to participate in Local Foods, Local Places in 2017. In 2017, federal partners are investing \$810,000 in Local Foods, Local Places.

In Region 6 the Louisiana State University Agriculture Center in Tallulah, Louisiana, will connect ongoing community efforts around physical fitness, access to healthy food and downtown revitalization. The Downtown Albuquerque Main Street Initiative in Albuquerque, New Mexico, plans to transform a vacant building in a struggling part of downtown into a community kitchen and local food hub to provide vocational opportunities for local farmers and food entrepreneurs, improve nutrition and food access for residents, and help attract investment to the area.